

# *Mindfulness in coaching: a model for coaching practice*

Article

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## Mindfulness coaching – A model for coaching practice

Jonathan Passmore

### Abstract

*This is the first in a series of papers to look at mindfulness coaching as an approach suitable for use with coaching clients. This paper presents a brief overview of mindfulness for readers who are less familiar with the approach and highlights other sources for a fuller account of mindfulness coaching. The paper sets the scene for a subsequent series of papers in this and future issues of The Coaching Psychologist Techniques Section. Each of these subsequent techniques papers presents a short description of a technique grounded in mindfulness that can be used with clients.*

**Keywords:** coaching; coaching psychology; mindfulness coaching, contemplation, reflection and meditation.

## The background - Mindfulness Coaching

The term mindfulness has its origins in the term 'Sati'. 'Sati' originally means to remember. The term combines remembering with a sense of non-judgemental acceptance, kindness and friendliness.

At a more formal level, a range of writers within the Buddhist tradition have offered definitions of mindfulness over the past two thousand five hundred years. Bhikkhu suggested that at its most simple, mindfulness could be considered to be '*reflective awareness*' (Bhikkhu, 1998, p47).

More recently writers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, who can be credited with polarising mindfulness in the West, has suggest it is a way of paying attention on purpose, in the present moment using a non-judgemental mind:

*"Mindfulness is simply a practical way to be more in touch with the fullness of your being through a systematic process of self-observation, self-inquiry and mindful action. There is nothing cold, analytical or unfeeling about it. The overall tenor of mindfulness practices gentle, appreciative, and nurturing"* (Kabat-Zinn, 1991, p13).

The core idea of awareness has links to other spiritual traditions including Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In Christianity this has been most commonly expressed through 'watching' within the Bible. A call for believes to watch, is a theme present through Biblical teaching from Revelations the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew, 25:1). Through this awareness, Christian's believe both the presence of the self and the presence of God becomes more real. For some practicing Christian's this is expressed through the practice of contemplative prayer, which in other traditions may be considered to be meditation. This involves a greater focus on being in God's presence, than asking God for a specific outcome.

Lambert (2012) has offered one route for Christian's to explore through a 40-day meditative journey. Others, such as Ellen Langer have offered alternative routes. Langer (1997) came up with the term mindfulness independently of its Buddhist and wider spiritual traditions. She was exploring the concept of 'mindlessness' that she felt had come to dominate modern life, and felt a switch to a more mindfulness state offered great benefits. Langer defined mindlessness as:

*"...characterized by an entrapment in old categories; by automatic behaviour that precludes attending to new signals; and by action that operates from a single perspective"* (Langer, 1997, p4).

For Langer, mindfulness is the opposite of this state of mindlessness. Mindfulness is the ordinary process of noticing, which involves three categories: *"the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective"* (Langer, 1997, p4).

Having used mindfulness over the past decade or more within my coaching practice, I have come to use the following short-hand definition which I share with clients:

*“Mindfulness is a state of mind, that when cultivated regularly, promotes an inclusive, accepted and authentic experience of the present moment”.*

This definition’s attraction is the experiential nature of the definition. While mindfulness writers have tended focus on the process, for leaders and manager in organizations I have found their interest is in what the process can deliver.

### **Mindfulness Resources**

From its origins more than two thousand years ago, through the work of Langer and Kabat-Zinn’s work, and more recently the excellent work of Michael Chaskalson work, there are a host of excellent resources available for psychologists to draw upon. However there remains a gap in the coaching space with few papers exploring the coaching benefits or how coaches might develop their practice through applying mindfulness either for themselves or their coaches. One of exceptions is Liz Hall’s Mindful Coaching (Hall (2013).

In Table 1 I have briefly summarized some of the papers and books available for coaching psychologists interested in this topic.

**Table 1: Mindfulness coaching - Books and chapters**

<b>Books</b>	<b>Book chapters &amp; articles</b>
Hall, L. (2013). <i>Mindful Coaching: How Mindfulness can transform coaching practice</i> . London: Kogan Page.	Marianetti, O., & Passmore, J. (2009). Mindfulness at work: paying attention to enhance wellbeing and performance. In
Lambert, S. (2012). <i>A book full of spark: A study in Christian Mindfulness</i> . Watford: First Apostle	A. Lindley (ed.) <i>Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work</i> (pp189-200). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Spence, G. (2008). <i>New directions in evidence-based coaching: investigations into the impact of mindfulness training goal attainment and wellbeing</i> . Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM.	Passmore, J., & Marianetti, O. (2007). The role of mindfulness in coaching. <i>The Coaching Psychologist</i> , 3(3), 131-138.

## Applying Mindfulness to coaching psychology practice

I have argued elsewhere that mindfulness can be useful by both the coach and coaches. I believe it offers four core benefits (Passmore & Marianetti, 2007). These can be summarised as: preparing for coaching for coaching, maintaining focus during the session, remaining emotionally detached and sharing these practices with coaches for benefits at work and home. These are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Four Coaching benefits**

Benefit for the coach	Benefits for clients
<p><b>(i) Preparing for coaching for coaching</b></p> <p>A short body scan can be useful when Preparing for a session as a tool to create the mind and create the appropriate mental space for the session to come</p> <p><b>(ii) Maintaining focus during the session</b></p> <p>Mindfulness can help the coach observe and capture the wandering mind to remain full focused through the session on the client and their experience.</p> <p><b>(iii) Remaining emotionally detached</b></p> <p>Mindfulness can help the coach be more conscious of their own emotional state, not only prior to the session but observing non-judgmentally changes during the session as the coach responses to the clients own changing emotions. Allowing the coach to respond empathetically while also observing these emotions to use these as useful material, where appropriate, for the conversation.</p>	<p><b>(iv) Teaching the techniques to clients:</b></p> <p>Coaches can draw on their own personal experience of using coaching for the benefits listed in column 1 and share their experiences with clients. What is important is to encourage clients to develop their mindfulness practice as a daily habit or routine, as opposed to a bandage to use in an emergency.</p>

In this series of short technique papers I wanted to build on the ideas from my work a decade ago to suggest some short practical techniques which can turn the positive feeling many coaching psychologists have for mindfulness in to half a dozen practical tools to use with coaching clients.

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